



Make Family Health History a Tradition

Sources to Learn Your Family's Health History

Introduction

Many health problems tend to run in families. Knowing your family's health history can be life-saving and fun too. Living relatives are not only the best source of family health history, they are also the ones who will benefit the most from it. The **Family Health History Toolkit** will help you 1) talk with your relatives about family health history, 2) write down what you learn, and 3) share it.

Following are genealogical sources to help you learn what living relatives may not know about your family health history.

Death Records

Death records usually mention the cause and date of death, making them second only to living family members for family health information. These records were originally kept for public health purposes—to alert officials of diseases or trends of concern, especially in cities and populated areas.

City or county officials typically record the death information and forward copies to the state. As a result, there are often both a county and a state copy. There may be differences in the two sets, where photocopies and computers were not used.

How to obtain death records

First, search an index, if available. An increasing number of statewide indexes are appearing on the Internet. Search (using Google.com, MSN.com, or other search engine) by name of the state with keywords such as “death index.” Indexes may be available at www.Ancestry.com (free at Family History Library), or links to indexes may be found on CyndisList at www.cyndislist.com/usvital.htm#States.

Next obtain a copy of the record. Many will be available at the Family History Library (FHL). Do a Place Search in the FHL Catalog for the state and the county levels. Big cities may also have records.

For records not at the FHL, see:

- Find addresses for state vital records offices at www.vitalrec.com and at CyndisList, previously cited.
- For records at the county level, use Everton's HandyBook for Genealogists (Logan, UT: Everton Publishers, 1999. FHL book 973 D27e)

Funeral Home Records

Funeral homes are a wonderful source of family health history. Their records often go back to around 1900, even when ownership has changed. In many states, new owners were required by law to keep the old records.



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Funeral homes often assisted in recording the death certificate and obituary. Therefore, these records may have even more detail about the cause of death. Funeral programs will name relatives who participated and whose health information may also be important to your family.

How to obtain funeral home records

Use a directory:

- Online: www.funeralnet.com
- Book: National Yellow Book of Funeral Directors (Youngstown, Ohio: Nomis Publications. FHL book 973 U24y.) This book is arranged by state, then by town. It gives addresses, phone numbers, and other information about the funeral homes. Funeral directors near you should also have it.

Soapbox: Phone them, state what you need, and ask when you can call back. Writing takes more of their time and you have to wait longer. Please treat them like the “golden goose” they are.

Obituaries

In the late 1800s, newspapers began to publish obituaries on a regular basis. Even today, it is one of the most popular sections. The cause of death was often included in earlier years, but may be masked or omitted altogether now.

How to obtain obituaries

- Many obituaries within the last 10 years or so can be found online. A search for “Obituaries” will find several sites.
- Contact public libraries in the area. If they have copies, they may search for a small fee.
- Most states have made an effort to obtain old newspapers. Try state archives, libraries, or major universities.

United States Censuses

Health clues from censuses, 1850–1930

Beginning in 1850, censuses started giving information about every person in each household. Each census has health clues to notice, such as:

- The age of the mother. Children born to older women may have health issues.
- A parent or child may have died. Death was more common than divorce until recently. Young deaths were often due to accidents, health issues, or genetics.
- You may find: a single-parent family, one parent with a different spouse, large gaps between children, and nieces, nephews, grandchildren with them.
- The occupation could affect health. For example, a hatter worked with chemicals that affected the brain, thus the term “mad hatter.”



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Health clues from specific censuses

- 1850–1880 Mortality Schedules give the date and cause of death.
- 1850–1880, and 1910 indicate if a person was blind, deaf, or dumb. Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes for 1880 gives more detail.
- 1900, 1920, and 1930 censuses on Ancestry.com allow you to search by relationships such as “patient” and “inmate” to find residents of hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions.

How to obtain census records

1850–1930: Use www.Ancestry.com at the Family History Library or at a Family History Center with an Internet connection. They have all census images and every-name indexes to most years.

In Utah, most public libraries have a subscription to ProQuest's HeritageQuestOnline, which has all the census images and head-of-family indexes to several census years.

Microfilms of censuses and head-of-family indexes for many years are available at the Family History Library. 1940–present: These censuses have not been released to the public. Since proof of death is a requirement for obtaining census information on your direct line (parent, grandparent), you will already have more health information than the census will offer.

Other Resources

Family items such as journals, religious records—even old prescription bottles—have clues to your family health history. Other records include hospitals, medical professionals, pensions, schools, passports, insurance forms, immigration, old newspaper articles (accidents or local health concerns), military, and occupational records. The list can go on and on. Check at the reference counters for ideas on how to find some of these records.

Summary

Living family members are the best source for collecting your family health history. They are also the ones who will benefit the most from your work. We're already looking at these records for family history. Why not collect your family's health history as well. It may save the life of a child or grandchild. Your family health history is your gift to the future.

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